![District of Columbia Public Schools]

CHANCELLOR'S NOTES

Chancellor Rhee's regular newsletter on learning, schools and system-wide reforms in DC Public Schools

February 2, 2010

DCPS Gems, School Choice, and the Out-of-Boundary Process

With broken lights, graffiti-covered walls, and less than 16 percent of students on grade level in reading and math, Sousa Middle School was one of our most struggling schools just three years ago.

Today, under the dynamic leadership of Principal Dwan Jordon, former students may not recognize their old school.

Image by Erik Wang, McKissack and McKissack-DC

After a facilities overhaul students are taking good care of their school, and last year alone students gained 17 percent in reading and 25 percent in math. They also met Adequate Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind for the first time in Sousa's history.

Sousa's Teachers Teach Me a Lesson

Historical data shows that after such an enthusiastic leap in achievement, even in the process of a turnaround, a school is not likely to continue at such a pace. Slow and steady growth is more common.

Recently I met Sousa's teachers in one of my weekly listening sessions with teachers at schools across the city. On the district level we had made some controversial decisions recently, so I had been expecting commentary about that.

Understanding the pressure that dramatic early results can create, I also wanted to assure this excellent group of teachers that a more graduated increase in future years was okay with me.

They had no questions about controversy. They went straight to teaching, and almost every question was about how to become better. Their energy level actually took me aback.

"What is the best resource to…? What else can we do? Have you seen… What do you think of…?" They were excited about the ambitious goals they had set and wanted to seize every opportunity to reach them.

I actually put the brakes on (not something I'm accustomed to!). I told them about historical data on school turnarounds, and said we did not expect student achievement gains that were similar to those they had shown in the prior year. We would all be disappointed if they lost ground, but a 4 or 5 percent gain would be terrific considering Sousa's rapid growth to date.

I expected them to be comforted by this. They were not.

"Let me tell you one thing," one teacher said. "The horse is out of the barn. Our motto is 'Striving for excellence' and our students will not be satisfied with a 4 percent increase. They are aiming for the blue [advanced], they want 20 percent gains, and they're not going to be satisfied with anything less!"

This striving for excellence is almost palpable at Sousa. Teachers know they have a long way to go, and 40 percent proficiency is far from where they want their students to be. But they are engaging students in their education to get there, and students are as fired up as their teachers are. Staff even convinced students to go to school on Saturdays to do the hard work it takes to catch up to and surpass our best schools.

As we are now in Out-of-Boundary lottery process in DCPS, parents may be interested to know that schools in every ward are moving quickly to become top choice schools in DCPS.

Out-of-Boundary Process

The Out-of-Boundary Process promotes public school choice for parents in the District of Columbia, allowing parents to apply at schools across the city through a lottery system. With 50 percent of our students attending schools outside their neighborhood boundaries, we have a robust system of choice in DCPS.

This year from Jan. 28 through Feb. 28, parents may choose up to six DCPS schools outside of their neighborhood boundaries and enter a random lottery that occurs on March 2, 2010.

This year we are continuing to improve, giving parents more choices, working to expand pre-kindergarten enrollment, and tailoring the application process to parents based on their feedback from previous years.

Learn more about the Out-of-Boundary lottery process.

DCPS Gems – Not Just West of the Park

We are also working to make sure every ward has terrific schools. Historically, schools in affluent neighborhoods west of the park have been known as the gems of DCPS: Mann, Janney, Deal, Murch, Key, Oyster, Hardy, etc. But there are some lesser known gems that are catching up, even surpassing them in performance.

For example, few know that in reading last year, Barnard Elementary in Ward 4 edged ahead of Murch and Key, two of our best elementary schools. Also, Noyes Elementary in Northeast outperformed Murch in reading and was on par with Key.

We have higher quality options for parents across the district, and though they are not all well known yet, we will do our best to make people aware of all places teachers and principals are increasing success.

Graduation rates are rising, we are increasing and improving middle school options across the city, and we now have a themed school in every ward, with Catalyst Schools offering arts programs as well as Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) options.

Though we still have hard work to do, parents have many more options to consider for the 2010 – 2011 school year.

I hope all of you know what it feels like to be in a school rapidly progressing toward excellence. There is a tremendous belief in children's potential and an unstoppable energy to hone potential into achievement. The students feel it, teachers feel it, and anyone who hears their stories feels it.

To Sousa's teachers—and the teachers and students in any school who are going for gains yet unseen—I have learned my lesson. Go ahead and blast my enthusiasm-curbing, brakes-pressing historical data out of the park—we are all behind you!

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